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SOME BITS OF PLANT-LORE.¹

THERE is a good deal of interesting Plant-Lore to be found among the negroes of the Southern States, and in the Canadian Provinces, but on the whole, save that of the American Indians, our American folk-lore in this particular direction is comparatively meagre, and little of what there is seems indigenous. The newness of the country, the practicality of a wealth-seeking nation furnishes poor soil for the dreamy, poetic traditions and scraps of traditions about trees and plants that have been brought to us from older countries.

The holm-oak (*Quercus Ilex*) in Russia has power to work miracles, the old Germans consecrated the oak to Thunar, their god of thunder, their Norse neighbors held their solemn war councils beneath some venerable oak, the Roman civic crown was of oak-leaves, the oak-groves in England's Druidical days were held sacred, but with us the oak is valued for its practical usefulness, the bark for its capacity to tan leather, the fruit to fatten swine, and the strong beautiful wood for making furniture and kerosene-barrels! Among the sordid cares of money-making small opportunity has been left for fostering classic traditions that have been imported from Europe and Asia or for the development of poetical or romantic rites or myths. I think that we may say that our American plant-lore is in general of a practical character, and so a pretty large proportion of our superstitions and superstitious usages relate to folk-medicine. From a considerable mass of miscellaneous plant-lore I select a few remedial charms. For generally, I take it, the article used to work a cure is carried or worn as an amulet rather than on account of any direct physical effect that it is supposed to have upon the disease, though occasionally the wearer's motive may be somewhat confused.

I remember that in Mansfield, Ohio, many years ago it was generally believed that the seeds of the Job's tears, *Coix Lachryma*, if worn about the neck would cure goitre (as would also amber or gold beads). In Portland, Maine, and in Boston it is thought that children teething should wear a string of Job's tears. They are also somewhat commonly sold for children to wear at this critical period in Philadelphia and in Cambridge, while in Peabody, Mass., they are generally kept for sale at the drug-stores, not only for this purpose but also to be worn as a prophylactic against or cure for sore throat and diphtheria. I knew of one mother triumphantly bringing to the druggist of whom she had bought them a string of these seeds covered with a dark incrustation which she identified as the sub-

¹ Read at the Third Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, Washington, D. C., December 29, 1891.

stance of the disease, driven out into the necklace, but which to the apothecary bore a suspicious resemblance to ordinary dirt.

In Miramichi, N. B., a double cedar-knot is carried in the pocket as a cure for rheumatism. For the same disease I have heard of a New Hampshire man carrying in his pocket a gall such as is commonly found on the stems of golden-rod, caused by the sting of the *Trypeta solidaginis* or the *Galechia galli-solidaginis*. This gall contains a small white grub, and the man who carried about in his pocket these "rheumaty-buds," as he called them, believed that as long as the grub in the "bud" remained alive it served as a sure preventive of rheumatism. In Missouri rheumatism is prevented by carrying in the pocket a nutmeg or a walnut, *Fuglans nigra*. In other localities a hickory-nut, *Carya alba*, is used, in others still a buckeye, *Æsculus glabra*, while perhaps the commonest of all these amulets is the very near relative of the buckeyes, the horse-chestnut. This in New Jersey is carried as a bringer of good luck. In Talladega, Alabama, the negroes believe that if one carries buckeyes in the pocket he will have no chills through the year. I have heard of people wearing a potato with a hole bored through it so as to form a sort of gigantic finger-ring as a cure for rheumatism, and have personally known of the potato carried in the pocket as another cure.¹ In some places the potato thus carried must be a stolen one. The true chestnut, *Castanea*, is sometimes carried, doubtless from the resemblance of its common name to that of the horse-chestnut. Indeed almost anything seems to be sufficient to ward off rheumatism, for in southern Michigan a pebble in the pocket serves the purpose.

Other diseases besides rheumatism are thought to be prevented or cured by vegetable substances of various kinds, worn or carried. A New Hampshire remedy for sore throat consists in wearing about the neck a stocking in the toe of which a potato has been tied. It is a Maine belief that a nutmeg pierced and hung about the neck by a string will prevent boils, croup, and neuralgia.

In Barre, Vt., the leaves of the *Habenaria orbiculata* are thought to be a valuable application for lameness or soreness. I have known of a farmer recently using them on a lame colt. The *Pyrus Americana* is in some parts of New Hampshire called witch-wood, and occasionally carried in the pocket to keep off witches. In Nova Scotia it is thought that it is a cause of bad luck to keep in the house a common Begonia called beefsteak geranium. In Salem and Boston it is thought to be unlucky to keep "Wandering Jew," *Tradescantia crassifolia* as a house-plant.

It is among the negroes that the most delightful plant-remedies

¹ This remedy is also an extremely common one in Southern Sweden.

are to be found ; witness the combination of cure and spell as described under the name of "conjuring a tooth," from Talladega, Alabama. Go into a lonely part of the woods with one of the opposite sex, who is to carry an axe. The bearer of the axe chops around the roots of a white oak, cuts off, with a large jackknife, nine splinters from the roots of the tree, then cuts around the roots of the aching tooth with the knife, dips each of the splinters in the blood that flows from these cuts, and finally buries the splinters at the foot of the tree from which they came. While doing this, the operator says over "something you don't understand" (undoubtedly a charm). This suggests another toothache-cure recorded in Aubrey's *Miscellanies*: "Take a new nail, and make the gum bleed with it, and then drive it into an oak. This did cure William Neal's son, a very stout gentleman, when he was almost mad with the pain and had a mind to have pistolled himself."

From Talladega also comes this curious remedy for the chills and fever: take the skin from the inside of an egg-shell, go to a young persimmon-tree three days in succession and tie a knot in the skin each day. This at once recalls a remedy for a cold, practised in the Netherlands, which consists in tying three knots in a willow-branch, and thus giving one's cold to the tree.¹

On the eastern shore of Maryland biliousness is treated by boring three holes in a carefully selected tree, and walking three times around it, saying, "Go away, bilious." No doubt it is a matter of the utmost importance whether the one who performs the spell walks "with the sun" or "against the sun" (Scottish "withershins"), but I have not been able to learn which is the approved direction.

In the West and South various plants are locally known as "fever-weeds," and supposed to be specifics for ague. In central Illinois, the *Verbena stricta* is never known by any other name but fever-weed. Its efficacy as a remedy for malarial diseases is extremely doubtful. In central Missouri one is recommended to take for ague a whole pepper-corn every morning for seven successive mornings. That this remedy is of more than local repute is shown by the fact that Dr. Buck cites pepper-corns as a remedy for intermittent fever in his most interesting, "*Medicinisher Volksglauben und Volksaberglauben aus Schwaben.*"

We have comparatively few philters ; — perhaps hardly any have a truly indigenous reputation — but there are some of European origin naturalized among us. Some of these have undergone a certain amount of variation since they have found a home on this side of the Atlantic. Plants used in love-divinations or "projects" are not uncommon. I subjoin an instance of the use of one common plant in a love-charm.

¹ Ennemoser's *History of Magic*, Howitt's translation, ii. 207.

In many parts of England and also in Scotland the familiar southernwood, *Artemisia abrotanum*, according to Britten and Holland's "Dictionary of English Plant-names," is known as lad's love, lad-love-lass, or lad's-love-and-lasses'-delight. Another British name for the plant is old man's love, or simply old man, from its use as recommended by Pliny, lib. xxi. cap. 21, and explained by Macer in the line (cap. 11), —

"Hæc etiam venerum, pulvino subdita tantum, incitat."

Now in Maine and in Woburn, Mass., this herb is called boy's love, and in the latter locality it is said that if a girl tucks a bit of it in her shoe she will marry the first boy whom she meets. In Salem a popular name for the plant is lad's love. In other parts of Massachusetts it is said that if a girl puts a piece of southernwood down her back she will marry the first boy whom she meets. In Boston, if a marriageable woman puts a bit of southernwood under the pillow on retiring, the first man whom she meets in the morning will (so says the superstition) be the one whom she is to marry.

In these half-playful observances we have merely survivals of what three hundred years ago was a matter of serious belief. For Wylliam Turner in his fine old English "Herball" writes in 1551, "some hold that thys herbe [Sothernwode] layd but under a mannys bolster, prouoketh men to the multiplyenge their kynde, and that it is good agaynst chermynge and wychyng of men, which by chermynge are not able to exercise the worke of generacion."

Fanny D. Bergen.